

July 7, 2024

The Acts of the Apostles
XXIII. Why Should I Feel Discouraged
Acts 18:1-11

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Last Sunday we sang together, “*Why should I feel discouraged?*” – the opening line of the old hymn, “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.”¹ But the truth is that we do sometimes feel discouraged in the life of faith – it is a normal part of the ebb and flow of ordinary discipleship. In fact, our passage this morning shows that even as passionate, faithful, and strong a disciple as Paul sometimes felt discouraged.

The evidence is found in two places in our text. First, when Paul cries out, after yet another rejection at yet another Jewish synagogue, “*Your blood be on your own heads . . . From now on I will go to the Gentiles.*” This is the same Paul who elsewhere states that he would be willing to be accursed himself, if only his Jewish brothers and sisters would believe in Jesus as the Messiah.² But, after getting run out of city after city by the Jewish leadership, Paul, now in Corinth, finally seems to have had enough.³ That angry outburst sounds like a man both frustrated and discouraged by the continual, and sometimes even violent, opposition he has faced from his own people.

The second piece of evidence in our text that Paul was experiencing a time of discouragement in his missionary work comes when the Lord Himself decides to intervene with Paul in a vision. The Lord Himself, seeing Paul’s discouragement, appears to Paul in a night vision to give him reassurance, to give him encouragement, to keep him going in his work and in his faith. “*Do not be afraid,*” the Lord says to Paul, “*but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.*” And clearly Paul did take encouragement from this vision, from this Word from the Lord. For he stays in Corinth for a full year and a half, building a strong church containing both Jews and Gentiles.

“*Why should I feel discouraged?*” But Paul knew discouragement – and not just Paul. Abraham got discouraged in his faith, Moses got discouraged in his faith, David got discouraged in his faith. The prophet Jeremiah once got so discouraged in his faith that he accused God of being a “deceitful brook” – a stream flowing strong one moment, only to dry up when he needed it most.⁴ Discouragement is part and parcel of the Christian experience – just as are times of rejoicing on the mountaintops of faith. But I think we are here being invited to take special comfort from this moment of Paul’s discouragement – and not just in that Paul was discouraged like us, but even more in the encouragement Christ gave to Paul. For what Christ gave to Paul, He gives also to us – to get us through those discouragement days.

And the first thing Christ gives to Paul in his discouragement, which He gives to us also, are companions. In Corinth, Paul meets two fellow tent-makers named Aquila and Priscilla. Their friendship and Christian support clearly meant the world to Paul – for he not only stays with them during his time in Corinth, but he also singles them out repeatedly in his letters.⁵ Clearly the gift of this friendship helped Paul through those discouragement days and beyond. And clearly also Christ gives this same gift to us, to help us through our own days of discouragement and difficulty in faith. Christ gives to us companions in Christ, our fellow members of this congregation, to help us through.

Sift through your memories for a moment – and it's all there. When we were grieving, there was someone who brought us a casserole or cake, someone who greeted us with a hug, even a group of Christian brothers and sisters who came to the funeral to support us, to show their love for us in that difficult hour. Or perhaps when we were lonely, someone came and sat beside us. When we were struggling with some decision or dilemma, or just the ordinary details of daily life, there was someone we knew we could talk to – or maybe it just came pouring out of us when someone came up and simply asked us how we were doing during the coffee hour, and we were met with a sympathetic ear and maybe even a word of wisdom. We take care of each other in this church, we care for one another in this small outpost of the Kingdom. And yet it can be so easy to take that for granted. But this right here – this fellowship, this communion, this congregation – this is one of the greatest gifts Christ gives to us to bring us through those times of discouragement.

Here's a homework assignment for you: look up every time the phrase “one another” appears in the New Testament – you know, love one another, help one another, bear one another's burdens. It's quite a list. And I'll bet that in looking over that list you will begin to see the faces of those here who have done those things, been those things, towards you. When we are discouraged in our walk of faith, Christ gives us brothers and sisters in the faith to help us and to see us through. Church!

Second, Christ gives encouragement to Paul through that vision by telling Him to keep on speaking the Word. Just keep on speaking the Word. For by keeping on doing what he was called by Jesus to do, the Word itself would refresh and encourage him, enable him to rise up from his despair. The Word has that sort of power. And Christ says the same thing to us. Perhaps not so much keep on speaking the Word, so much as keep on reading the Word. For the same is true for us – that the Word itself, through our continual and deepening engagement with it, has the power to refresh us when we are discouraged, to strengthen us through the difficult days, to enable us to rise up from our times of despair into hope once again. Stay in the Word, Jesus says to Paul and to us.

I'll give a personal example: one thing I find helpful in my discouragement days is to read the Psalms. There are powerful verses of encouragement everywhere in Scripture – I'm guessing each one of us has a mental list of “go-to” verses. But here is what I love about the Psalms – every possible emotion, spiritual concern, human struggle or joy we experience as the people of God is found somewhere or another in the Psalms. And, in particular, I find the Psalms a sympathetic companion and helpful friend for the times when faith is not easy or light and bright.

Psalm 42, for example. The Psalmist begins with his lament of discouragement:

*As a deer pants for flowing streams,
 so pants my soul for you, O God.
 My soul thirsts for God,
 for the living God.
 When shall I come and appear before God?
 My tears have been my food day and night . . .*

And then the Psalmist, in his discouragement, remembers happier days of faith – days when his faith was so full and joyful that he would lead the procession of thanksgiving and worship into the Temple. But remembrance of these better times only seems to deepen the discouragement of the present moment. He cries out: *“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?”*

But then comes the word of reassurance. He begins to reflect on God – who God is and what God has done and promises to do:

*By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
 and at night his song is with me,
 a prayer to the God of my life.*

And with that reminder, that reassurance, the Psalmist ends – but not on a note of despair. Now the Psalmist can speak a word of hope:

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
 and why are you in turmoil within me?
 Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
 my salvation and my God.*

The Word of God has the power to see us through the discouragement days. And so Christ tells Paul to keep on speaking that Word no matter what is going on in his head or in his heart. And so Christ tells us to keep on reading that Word, studying it, praying our way through it in our own discouragement days. For in His Word is our reassurance. In His Word is our source of hope. In His Word is the promise of His grace, goodness, power, and love – which shall never fail us.

And the last reassurance Christ gives to Paul in the midst of his discouragement is simply a reminder of His promise that He is with us always – even in the discouragement days, even to the end of the age.⁶ Christ says to Paul, and to us, even and especially in the midst of our discouragement days, *“For I am with you.”* And with that reassurance comes the reminder of His promise to us that nothing which is out there, nor anything which is in here, will ever be able to separate us from His presence and His love. He is with us always. He is watching over us in love always. Beneath us always are the everlasting arms.⁷ And He will see us through the discouragement days.

I love this story as a parable of how God is always watching over us – even and especially in those times of discouragement when it can be difficult for us to sense that He is doing so. Pastor

and writer Garret Keizer tells of a friend who lives in the remote town of Victory, Vermont – a tiny town possessing no church, no store, and no school; known only for two things, its sizable cranberry bog and the fact that it was the last town in Vermont to get electricity. Keizer writes:

During the course of earning her master’s degree, this friend found it necessary to commute several times a week from Victory to the state university in Burlington, a good hundred miles away. Coming home late at night, she would see an old man sitting by the side of her road. He was always there, in subzero temperatures, in stormy weather, no matter how late she returned. He made no acknowledgement of her passing. The snow settled on his cap and shoulders as if he were merely another gnarled old tree.

She often wondered what brought him to the same spot every evening – what stubborn habit, private grief or mental disorder. I wonder if she didn’t sometimes begin to doubt her senses, or believe in ghosts.

Finally, she asked a neighbor of hers, “Have you ever seen an old man who sits by the road late at night?”

“Oh, yes,” said the neighbor, “many times.”

“Is he . . . a little touched upstairs? Does he ever go home?”

“He’s no more touched than you or me,” her neighbor laughed. “And he goes home right after you do. You see, he doesn’t like the idea of you driving by yourself out late all alone on these back roads, so every night he walks out to wait for you. When he sees your taillights disappear around the bend, and he knows you’re OK, he goes home to bed.”⁸

Well, there it is. God is watching over us in love, just like that, and more so – and especially in the discouragement days when we are not so sure that is so. In fact, unlike the old man in that story, our God never sleeps, never takes a break from His watch of faithful love over us. Just as the Psalmist says:

*He will not let your foot be moved;
 he who keeps you will not slumber.
 Behold, he who keeps Israel
 will neither slumber nor sleep.
 The Lord is your keeper;
 the Lord is your shade on your right hand . . .
 The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in
 from this time forth and forevermore.⁹*

Just as Jesus reminded Paul, He reminds us also – that He is with us always. And we are ever in His care.

Well, we started out with the opening line of the first verse of “His Eye Is on the Sparrow” – “*Why should I feel discouraged?*” Maybe now would be a good time for the opening line of the second verse:

*“Let not your heart be troubled,”
his tender word I hear,
and resting on his goodness,
I lose my doubts and fear;
though by the path he leadeth
but one step I may see;
his eye is on the sparrow,
and I know he watches me;
his eye is on the sparrow,
and I know he watches me.”¹⁰*

¹ Hymn #661 in our Presbyterian Glory to God hymnbook. Text by Civilla Durfee Martin.

² Romans 9:3.

³ On this, his second missionary journey, Paul has already been run out of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. See Acts 16-17.

⁴ Jeremiah 15:18.

⁵ Romans 16:3, I Corinthians 16:19, II Timothy 4:19.

⁶ See also Matthew 28:20.

⁷ Deuteronomy 33:27.

⁸ Garret Keizer, “Watchers in the Night: Faith at Work,” Christian Century, Vol. 117, No. 11 (April 5, 2000), page unknown.

⁹ Psalm 121:3-5, 8.

¹⁰ Civilla Durfee Martin.